

Unearthing: Indigenous Art as Environmental Activism in Contemporary Canada

David Walls

University of North Carolina Greensboro

Lloyd International Honors College

April 22nd, 2021

Word Count: 5,510

Introduction

Upon a layer of smokey black space, a canoe containing two dogs moves along a river. In the background two lines bend and intersect to imply some form of landscape. Below the water, a variety of living creatures coexist, including a male figure, koi fish, birds, and geese. Within some of these creatures curved lines create a new image, faces formed by teeth, eyes, and a nose, but not attributable to any recognizable form of life. The directionality of the figures and the depiction of these images all in red convey a sense of action and urgency. This description illustrates Marianne Nicolson's *La'am 'lawisuxw Yaxuxsan's 'Nalax - Then the Deluge of Our World Came* (2017), a large-scale painting that combines aspects of Indigenous identity, ancestral knowledge, and the looming threat of global warming (figure 1). This work not only opens a dialogue surrounding the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the environment within a Canadian lens but its presentation in a gallery setting, specifically the University of British Columbia's 2019 exhibition *Hexsa'qm: To Be Here Always*, provides a foundation and outlet to discuss contemporary environmental issues.

Although actions that negatively impact the environment, and subsequent activism against them, take place in many areas of the world, the impact these actions have on Indigenous communities takes a unique form, running parallel with other issues such as colonization and the fight for land reclamation. Additionally, the use of art as a tool for activism regarding environmental issues has been often overlooked, especially within Canada. To explore contemporary art's role and effectiveness in communicating these issues, I will use the artwork of three Indigenous artists in Canada as a foundation to discuss how environmental activism creates a unique impact through art, how new forms of media have been utilized to expand environmental discussions, and the impact that Indigenous artists have on curatorial norms.

I will briefly contextualize forms of environmental activism in a discussion of the Wet'suwet'en nation's fight against the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline. I will then look at the works of artists Daphne Odjig and Bill Reid to contextualize contemporary Canadian artwork. Additionally, I will analyze the art of Christi Belcourt, Marianne Nicolson, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun to explore how environment and activism are conveyed through varying mediums. Finally, I will study the presentation of these artworks in a museum and gallery setting and their effects on curatorial practice. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary art, while continuing to reference tradition, embraces new methods and practices to convey a growing challenge faced by the environment and Indigenous communities. Through this paper I attempt to discover how contemporary Indigenous artwork in Canada has drawn attention to environmental issues and discussed problematic perception of Indigenous peoples.

Contextualization: Environmental Activism

To better understand the role of contemporary Indigenous art in regard to Canada's environmental issues, it is important to first establish the reasons for activism. A good example of this can be seen in the Wet'suwet'en nation's protests against the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline impeding on Indigenous land. The Wet'suwet'en is an Indigenous nation that has resided for thousands of years in what is now known as British Columbia and consists of five clans: Gilseyhu (Big Frog), Laksilyu (Small Frog), Tsayu (Beaver), Laksamshu (Fireweed and Owl), and Gitdumden (Wolf and Bear) which are further divided into 13 house groups.¹

The pipeline is a multi-billion dollar project overseen by the TC Energy company, which seeks to deliver natural gas over a stretch of 670 kilometers (416 miles) from Dawson Creek to a

¹ "Office of the Wet'suwet'en."

facility in Kitimat, just north of Vancouver in British Columbia.² The pipeline cuts directly across traditional Wet'suwet'en lands spanning over 22,000 square kilometers, and the rejection of the project by Wet'suwet'en leaders also highlights the larger underlying issues regarding recognition and occupation of ancestral lands, as well as Indigenous governance. This rejection also acts as a good example of how environmental activism within Canada transcends the concept of harm to the environment, instead centering around the relationship between the environment and those who occupy it.

The implementation of the pipeline on Indigenous lands and its negative environmental impact remains a key focus of protests, however, the project also brings to light the Canadian government's disregard for traditional governmental systems. This can be seen through the signing of an agreement by the Wet'suwet'en elected band council to allow the pipeline to continue, with negotiations regarding the project only being held with the council.³ Though on the surface this may seem to be a legitimate process that allows for Indigenous leaders to have a voice, it actually excludes the Hereditary Chiefs as a traditional form of government and instead only recognizes the band council, which was created by the Canadian government and imposed historically to implement Canada's policies, including economic development projects.⁴ Protests against the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline have occurred in various forms and places, including at the Gilseyhu Clan's Unist'ot'en Healing Center, which was established almost a decade ago near the Morice River and now acts as an example of reoccupation.

As the pipeline advances in 2021 and the fight against it perseveres, it is important to recognize the role that art has played in environmental activism. Artwork can be distributed in

² "TC Energy — Coastal GasLink."

³ Davis, "Unceded Land."

⁴ Davis.

various ways as a tool for activism including protest signs, brochures, and supporter toolkits that give information on how people can provide support. A good example of this is a digital work by artist Christi Belcourt that depicts the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs, traditionally dressed, with text that reads "The Hereditary Chiefs Say NO To All Pipelines" and "I Stand With Unist'ot'en" (figure 2). This work and its distribution through a supporter toolkit act as one of many ways art becomes activism. As part of a supporter toolkit, this image can be easily distributed and printed for protests, and the text is a statement of solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en nation.

Contextualization: Contemporary Artwork

While art has made its way into various forms of activism, it is important to note what contemporary Indigenous artwork looks like in Canada and how it relates to both traditional works and contemporary movements in other geographies. Instead of fully discussing the rich and storied history of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada, this paper will briefly focus on two artists that contributed to the growth of contemporary art and serve as great examples of how art can draw attention to broader issues. Contemporary art generally encompasses a variety of topics, but at the center of most Indigenous Canadian works, especially those that discuss political and social issues, lies the concept of identity and the challenging of outside perceptions while continually honoring traditional imagery. This can be seen in the latter half of the 20th century, when a variety of artists including Daphne Odjig and Bill Reid provided unique contributions to Canada's contemporary art scene. Although contemporary works have gradually found identity for many years, the contributions of these artists in particular have set a foundation for the artwork we see today.

In 1978 Daphne Odjig was commissioned by the National Museum of Man, now the Canadian Museum of History, to paint a mural that she titled *The Indian In Transition* (figure 3), which documented the ravages of social injustice, political oppression, and the cultural deprivation of Canada's Native people.⁵ On this enormous 9' x 27' canvas, flowing shapes and bold colors imbue a sense of narrative, taking the viewer through stages of time in depictions of figures, landscape, and animals in an almost cubist manner. Although not focusing on aspects of physical environment, this work still acts as an exceptional exemplar of how contemporary artists began to portray Indigenous identity and experiences, which act as key components of artworks used as tools for environmental activism. These components are best described by Odjig herself, who stated:

The rebirth of Indian consciousness created emotions that made the subject matter of my art more spontaneous. I was no longer preoccupied with the mechanical aspects of art, or with personal survival. My work was empowered by the joys, sorrows, and survival of my people in transition.⁶

While Odjig's work emphasizes the exploration of Indigenous identity and helps mark the presence of Indigenous artists in contemporary Canada, it was her participation in the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI) that allowed her to make significant contributions to the greater contemporary artistic sphere. The PNIAI is also referred to as the "Native Group of Seven," a reference to a school of landscape painters in Canada from 1920 to 1933.⁷ The group is a collective of artists formed in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1973 with the goal of condemning colonial perspectives and discriminatory social policies and to redefine the culture

⁵ Viviane Gray, "Indian Artists' Statements Through Time," in *In the Shadow of the Sun: Perspectives on Contemporary Native Art* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1993), p. 148.

⁶ Daphne Odjig, Bob Boyer, and Carol Podedworny, *Odjig: The Art of Daphne Odjig, 1966-2000* (Toronto, Ont.: Key Porter Books, 2001), p. 54.

⁷ Varley and Bingham, "Group of Seven | The Canadian Encyclopedia."

of contemporary institutions to exhibit Indigenous works with objective truth.⁸ The very existence of PNIAI is an example of the convergence of art and activism in early contemporary Canadian art. Member Joseph Sánchez provides a simple explanation of the group, stating “...our cause was simple: to be able to exhibit and receive acceptance as artists.”⁹ The emphasis of identity present within her work and her involvement in the PNIAI place Odjig as a key figure in the emergence and establishment of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada.

Another key figure is artist Bill Reid, whose actions affirm the role that artists can play in activism. Reid’s work, which spanned from jewelry to monumental sculpture, was reflective of his own Haida identity, having been born in Victoria, British Columbia to a Haida mother and white American father.¹⁰ While much of his work centered around this identity, Reid also found opportunity to embed activism within his artistic practice.¹¹ This took form most notably when in 1986, after 30 years of finding success as an artist, he refused to have his commissioned sculpture, titled *Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Black Canoe* (1991) (figure 4), installed in the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. to bring attention to the negative impacts that the logging industry had on the Haida people and Lyell Island.¹² Though the action taken by Reid presents a dialogue on its own, there is also much that the sculpture itself presents. This work depicts a canoe filled with creatures of myth alongside humans and animals, almost overflowing from the small space of the canoe as they paddle along. Among these figures are Raven and Eagle, representations of two distinct and equal Haida lineages, with Raven positioned at the

⁸ Sánchez, “PNIAI / Native Group of Seven.”

⁹ Sánchez, “The Formation of Professional Native Artists, Inc” p. 31

¹⁰ “Bill Reid Gallery | About Bill Reid.”

¹¹ For more information on Haida, see <http://www.ccthita.org/about/history/>

¹² Gray, p. 150.

stern guiding the canoe's direction, and Eagle sitting near the center.¹³ The depiction of Haida lineage and use of the canoe as a representation of cultural direction convey Reid's intent to connect Indigeneity to outside perspectives and explore this connection moving forward. This is perhaps articulated best by Reid himself, who in a poem regarding this work states:

So there is certainly no lack of activity in our little boat, but is there any purpose? Is the tall figure who may or may not be the Spirit of Haida Gwaii leading us, for we are all in the same boat, to a sheltered beach beyond the rim of the world as he seems to be, or is he lost in a dream of his own dreamings? The boat moves on, forever anchored in the same place.¹⁴

Reid uses his position as an artist and his relationship with institutions to highlight the negative impact of industry on the environment in an early example of art and environmental activism's connection. Additionally, this connection takes form through the presentation of his work in various institutions including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, and the Vancouver International Airport, all environments that allow for the artwork to engage and teach new audiences.

Christi Belcourt

Although Odjig and Reid provide good examples of the foundational aspects of Indigenous artwork in contemporary Canada, they exist in an earlier stage of the movement. When thinking of the intersection of art and environmental activism more recently, there is no better example than Métis artist Christi Belcourt, whose silkscreen banners showing slogans such as "Water is Sacred," and canvases portraying imagery of nature in a bead-like patterning celebrate Indigenous worldviews and also act as physical tools to call attention toward

¹³ "Civilization.ca - Grand Hall - Spirit of Haida Gwaii."

¹⁴ "The Spirit of Haida Gwaii."

environmental issues. This can be seen in Belcourt's founding of the Onaman Collective along with artists Isaac Murdoch and Erin Konsmo in 2014.

The Onaman Collective is a community-based arts and social justice organization with the goal to converge land-based art creation with traditional knowledge.¹⁵ An emphasis on the intersection of art and activism is present within the collective's name, which refers to a binding/clotting agent used in traditional medicine and represents a combination of art, community, and environment. The collective has generated numerous projects (including youth mentorship and screen-printing workshops) and provides constructive resources, such as free-to-download banner art created by Belcourt and Murdoch for use in water/land protection actions, and an instructional video about assembling protest banners.¹⁶ One of these banners depicts a frog sitting above three curved lines representing a body of water, with the word *Unist'ot'en* at the top and the phrase "No Pipelines" at the bottom, both depicted in red (figure 5). While referencing the Unist'ot'en Healing Center's role in the fight against Coastal Gaslink's pipeline, this work also depicts environmental life and the existence of Unist'ot'en as part of Wet'suwet'en's Gilseyhu (Big Frog) clan.

Many of the collective's banners have been used in multiple protests including a 2016 protest held outside of the Supreme Court of Canada against offshore seismic testing near Clyde River, Nunavut, as well as a rally in 2016 near Espanola, Ontario, which voiced opposition to the Enbridge Line 5 pipeline.¹⁷ The accessibility of these banner artworks, the range of environmental issues they discuss, and their use in various protests serve as a great example of

¹⁵ "What We Do | Onaman Collective."

¹⁶ See <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>

¹⁷ Awasis, "Keep It in the Ground! - Canadian Art."

art's integral role in environmental activism specific to Canada because of their positioning outside of gallery walls.

Belcourt has also brought art to the forefront of protests through her participation in the Tiny House Warriors in 2017, a project in which tiny houses are constructed, adorned with artwork, and placed in the path of the Trans Mountain pipeline route in an effort to re-establish village sites and stop the Trans Mountain pipeline from crossing unceded Secwepemc Territory.¹⁸ Along with Isaac Murdoch and a team of volunteers, Belcourt painted a tiny home black with an Orca depicted in white on the left (figure 6).¹⁹ The presentation of this work in anti-pipeline action and the depiction of a species at risk of being impacted by the pipeline place artwork at the center of environmental activist actions and elevates art beyond aesthetic perceptions.

While much of Belcourt's work has seen use in a more direct form of activism, its presentation within a museum setting also raises awareness and builds dialogue surrounding environmental activism. This can be seen specifically in her touring exhibition *Uprising: The Power of Mother Earth* and its use of art-making workshops as a unique approach to connect activism and art. The exhibition opened in 2019 at the Carleton University Art Gallery, where Belcourt worked with students to create silkscreen banners in an assembly line fashion, reminding them "These banners are going to be sent — for free — to water protectors and land protectors."²⁰ What this exhibition shows is that there are opportunities for engagement and activist messaging beyond the simple action of hanging works on a wall, and that artwork can

¹⁸ "TINY HOUSE WARRIORS – Our Land Is Home."

¹⁹ Sandals, "Tiny Art Houses Stand Up to Pipeline."

²⁰ Rubinstein, "Indigenous Art and Activism."

become more effective when viewers are able to engage in creative processes with the artist and see the use of art beyond gallery walls.

Marianne Nicolson

There are other artists, however, who embrace the implementation of artwork in both a museum setting and in the natural environment itself. Of these artists, Marianne Nicolson stands out through her successful use of community engagement and installation to draw attention to various topics including climate change and the relationship between community and land. Nicolson is a member of the Dzawada'enuxw First Nation, a Kwakwaka'wakw people of the Pacific Northwest Coast, whose interdisciplinary work is propelled by a mandate for social justice and the well-being of all peoples.²¹ Within her expansive body of work, *Cliff Painting* (1998), the 2019 Pictograph Project, and the 2013 *Walking on Water (Thin Ice)* exhibition all display art's power in calling attention to environmental issues and discussing negative impacts of outside forces on Indigenous peoples.

Marianne Nicolson's *Cliff Painting* (1998) is a large 28- by 38-foot pictograph painted on a cliffside near the end of Kingcome Inlet, close to her ancestral village Gwa'yi in British Columbia (figure 7). The pictograph, painted in a copper tone, depicts a shield-like crest symbol that reflects an oral history of the Dzawada'enuxw People and their relationship to the land. The use of land itself, a canvas in the form of a cliff, questions how humans relate to place and emphasizes the existence of land ownership within environmental activism through its geography and large scale. Nicolson discusses this in an interview with Matthew Ryan Smith, where she states:

²¹ "Artist Statement."

You could link it to the environmental movement today, where this general societal distance from land and from place has created a cesspool of land abasement that affects all populations. We have to address issues—our issues—of how we consider our homeland and what those issues are. I feel strongly that Indigenous peoples have answers to those questions, if we're willing to listen.²²

In Nicolson's continual practice of intersecting art and activism, she returns to creating pictographs in 2019 in a communal project that stemmed from pre-existing protests against damages on Dzawada'enuxw caused by logging and fish farms.²³ In collaboration with over 55 participants, all connected to Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw, Nicolson painted a large-scale series of pictographs along cliffsides and rock formations near the site of *Cliff Painting*, but further into the territory (figure 8). Geographic location seems to play an even larger role in this project than in *Cliff Painting* due to a narrower focus on symbolism of reoccupation, extending reach within the land, and being closer to fish farms. Nicolson describes the project's location and its place within the contemporary by saying:

The location of the new pictograph is on a group of islands referred to as Lixi, but also known as Na'nawalakwe, or 'Supernatural Ones.' It is covered in a shell midden so extensive and deep that the beaches are almost pure white. We wanted to combine this ancient presence with a modern presence and create a continuum.²⁴

Through this statement she describes a geographical indicator of territory and highlight that the environment and those connected to it are there to stay.

Both *Cliff Painting* and the 2019 pictograph project work in tandem with physical environmental spaces, however, Nicolson has also used museum space to highlight the connection of Indigeneity and environmental activism. In the 2013 exhibition titled *Walking on Water (Thin Ice)* she positions multiple blue sculptures, shaped almost like tombstones around

²² Smith, "Dzawada'enuxw Interdisciplinary Artist and Educator Marianne Nicolson, PhD." p. 59

²³ Woodend, "Power, Protest and Pictographs."

²⁴ Woodend, "Power, Protest and Pictographs."

the gallery space, each sitting atop a small, structured pile of a sand-colored material (figure 9). There are also traditional and figural iconographies shown in white and etched into each sculpture. Each sculpture is representative of a killer whale fin, as killer whales are known to represent healing in Kwakwaka'wakw culture, and the color blue alludes to water or glacial forms.²⁵ The use of symbolism does not encompass the entirety of this work but instead opens up to a broader discussion of Canadian environmental policy and a relationship between people and water systems. In regards to these connections, Nicolson explains:

My comment was that policy-wise, we're watering down our relationship to the environment. Around that time, Canada passed legislative bills that removed water rights, so for Canada—and the general population—their relationship to these water systems was basically being whittled down to a hope for a miracle.²⁶

The title of the work, *Walking on Water*, is a phrase directly referencing Jesus and his miracle of walking on the surface of water. With these sculptures appearing to rise above the water's surface, a context is formed in which viewers of the work are the ones walking on water and placed directly in the issues being discussed. Through this work, Marianne Nicolson brings aspects of earthly environment into a museum space to spark dialogue and reach new audiences.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

Another Indigenous artist that has found recognition within museums is Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who is of Coast Salish and Okanagan descent, and whose large-scale acrylic paintings and exploration of new media such as virtual reality have confronted environmental

²⁵ Laurence, "Marianne Nicolson's *Walking on Water* (Thin Ice) Asks Us to Consider the Consequences of Climate Change."

²⁶ Smith, p. 63-64

issues by utilizing narrative. He also relates environmental issues to colonialism, with the backdrop of surrealism.

In his painting *Killer Whale has a Vision and Comes to Talk to Me about Proximological Encroachments of Civilizations in the Oceans* (2010) narrative fuels a profound discussion of human impact on the natural world (figure 10). Within this painting, a large, highly stylized humanoid figure, constructed of contrasting shapes and colors, stands on a shore with his arms reaching out toward a killer whale emerging from the ocean. As a fragmented sun, appearing as an unfamiliar floral shape, shines upon this scene, the killer whale hovers above the water, suspended by an unknown brown material. By crafting a narrative surrounding the relationship between these two subjects in a surrealist manner similar to that of Salvador Dalí, Yuxweluptun is able to initiate introspection within viewers regarding negative environmental impacts. While the surrealist nature of the work allows for a wide range of interpretation, its title hints at a tarnished connection between civilization and land, positioning the killer whale and the ocean itself as victims of these impacts.

An abstracted humanoid figure also appears in another of Yuxweluptun's paintings titled *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990), which depicts the figure observing two humans with white skin standing on top of assorted objects emerging from a hole in the ground while attempting to "patch" a hole in the sky (figure 11). The two small figures seem out of place among a more abstract landscape, as if they have emerged without warning, and their presence has not gone unnoticed. An impacted environment shown as the hole in the sky and the contrast caused by this presence represent the impact colonialism has had on Indigenous lands in Canada and is a moment in which this connection is seen in art.

Outside of his beautifully painted works, Yuxweluptun has created what is arguably the most unique way that Indigeneity and art have intersected. This takes form in *Unceded Territories* (2019) a virtual reality experience created in partnership with filmmaker and virtual reality director Paisley Smith.²⁷ In this work, participants are placed in a virtual world designed by Yuxweluptun and are encouraged to act as creators themselves with the ability to change the environment with virtual paint (figure 12). When participants are finished, the environment has been completely changed and the virtual paint has taken up residence with no regard for what existed before it. *Unceded Territories* brings people into a unique experience with the intention of emphasizing Indigenous communities' position on the front lines of climate change.

Museums/Exhibitions

The artworks of Christi Belcourt, Marianne Nicolson, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun are perfect examples of art's role in environmental activism, and the presentation of their work in museums and galleries provide a foundation for an exploration into how Indigenous art as activism can influence curatorial practices. There is certainly always more progress to be made, though recent exhibitions such as *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now* act as positive exemplars that can shape the inclusion and representation of Indigenous art as activism in art institutions moving forward into the future. Before discussing this exhibition and how it can positively shape curation, it is important to first acknowledge how certain mistakes made in the 1988 exhibition *The Spirit Sings* influenced change in curatorial and administrative practices in relation to Indigenous art and activism.

The Spirit Sings was an exhibition that opened at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary (developed as a showcase for Calgary's winter Olympics) with an intention to celebrate cultural

²⁷ Guo, "Indigenous Artists Use Technology to Tell Stories About Their Ancestral Lands."

diversity among Canada's Indigenous peoples.²⁸ High costs occurring as a result of requesting loans from various European museum created a need for funding, which eventually came in the form of a corporate sponsorship from the Shell Oil company. This would prove to be a fatal mistake that showed a lack of understanding and a dominant disparity between non-Indigenous curators and administrators and the Indigenous people whose art they researched and positioned into an exhibition. Shell Oil had been one of many petroleum companies drilling on land within Lubicon Cree of Northern Alberta territory, completely disregarding the Lubicon's efforts to negotiate treaty rights with federal and provincial governments.²⁹ As a result of this occurrence, criticism of the exhibition arose from Indigenous communities and opposition of their contemporary treatment heightened.

There were also other problematic aspects of the exhibition that hindered the use of gallery space to reflect contemporary realities. This included the display of only historical objects and exclusion of contemporary work, which encompassed an omission of realities such as the Lubicon's efforts.³⁰ The criticism of *The Spirit Sings* prompted multiple efforts to examine the state of Canadian art institutions, including a conference in 1990 by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association that included artists, scholars, curators, and administrators working together to discuss collections access, sponsorship, and representation. Based upon this conference, the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples completed a two-year research and subsequently published a final report providing guidelines and recommendations for ethical frameworks and strategies for handling and representing art of Indigenous culture.³¹

²⁸ Heather Devine, "After The Spirit Sang," in *How Canadians Communicate: Contexts of Canadian Popular Culture*, ed. Bart Beaty et al. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2010), p. 217.

²⁹ Devine, p. 218

³⁰ Lee-Ann Martin, "Anger and Reconciliation: A Very Brief History of Exhibiting Contemporary Indigenous Art in Canada," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (2017): p. 109, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692560>.

³¹ Martin, p. 110

Ultimately, *The Spirit Sings* did not act as a singular instance of administrative failure, but instead illuminated Canada's troubled history of problematic Indigenous policies through an artistic context.

Although this exhibition is a reminder of curatorial and administrative problems in museums and galleries, it is important to also examine a positive and successful exhibition that showed how contemporary Indigenous artwork should be presented moving forward. *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, an exhibition organized by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, takes a closer look at contemporary works across a variety of mediums by Indigenous artists within North America. The exhibition featured over 80 artworks created since the 1950s with the goal of broadening the definition of contemporary art through a new understanding of Indigenous art.³²

There are three key factors of this exhibition that make it a successful foundation for future exhibitions. The first is a placement of artworks within art historical canon. This can be seen in the exhibition's body of work beginning in the 1950s, a pivotal time in the development of Indigenous art in the contemporary, evident in Daphne Odjig's founding of Indigenous-run art spaces.³³

Secondly, *Art for a New Understanding* approaches the curatorial process with an intention to expand representation and develop a collection that reflects North America's artistic history more deeply. While loaned artworks from different institutions are part of many exhibitions and remain an important component of curation, curators Mindy N. Besaw and Manuela Well-Off-Man went beyond this by developing the museum's collection through

³² "Art for a New Understanding - Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art."

³³ Besaw, Hopkins, and Well-Off-Man, "Art for a New Understanding." p. 6

acquisitions of contemporary works by artists such as Fritz Scholder and Jeffrey Gibson.³⁴ By implementing these works into their collection, Crystal Bridges becomes more inclusive and creates opportunities beyond a single exhibition. Additionally, this creates a call to action for museums to begin broadening their perceptions of what American and Canadian art is.

Lastly, this exhibition calls attention to a history of problematic perceptions of Indigenous art within museums and emphasizes a need for reassessment of art history and the absence of Indigenous histories within it. This is seen in the title of the exhibition itself, which comes from artist Brian Jungen's series of sculptures, *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998-2003), that transform Nike Air Jordan shoes into ersatz Northwest Coast items, to discuss the romanticization and commodification of Indigenous art (figure 13).³⁵ The exhibition's very name calling attention to problematic perceptions creates a strong message of its narrative and presents it directly to an audience before they even begin to view artworks.

While Art for a New Understanding encompasses a wide breadth of concepts, there are also forms of environmental activism within it, something important to note as having a place within contemporary art's growth. This most notably comes in the form of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, whose artwork titled *Scorched Earth, Clear Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix* (1991) confronts colonial legacies and environmental impacts while being shown alongside other artists that utilize new forms of expression (figure 14). In this work, two figures observe a surrealist landscape, specifically a beach with a small hill occupying the background. A large creature emerges from the water, its head examining the sand closely, as if hesitant to move further. The title of this work and the creature's depiction most likely

³⁴ Besaw, Hopkins, and Well-Off-Man, p. 5

³⁵ Besaw, Hopkins, and Well-Off-Man, p. 5

reference negative environmental impacts of colonial actions and the efforts of Indigenous peoples to fix them. The presentation of this work within the *Art for a New Understanding* exhibition brings environmental activism into a broader conversation of Indigenous

Conclusion

Indigenous artwork and its ties to environmental activism has been present throughout art's contemporary history, yet has only recently found exposure in museum and gallery exhibitions. By examining ways in which art has been used as a tool for environmental activism, specifically in Indigenous communities, art institutions can reposition themselves to not only be more inclusive, but also expand ways in which contemporary art is generally presented. There are already many examples, although often overlooked, of art that can expand and challenge perceptions of Indigenous cultures while also conveying messages against unjust environmental projects and efforts to maintain land sovereignty.

Artist Christi Belcourt has utilized community engagement in the form of workshops and emphasized the accessibility of her work to broaden its impact and introduce audiences to Indigenous activism. Accessibility has been a driving force in the use of Belcourt's work in multiple protests including one which opposed the Enbridge Line 5 pipeline. Marianne Nicolson has also engaged new audiences, but through different means such as the application of artwork onto land itself, as seen in her work *Cliff Painting* (1991). While this application exists outside of a gallery's walls, it allows for a discussion of where the greatest impact of art can exist. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's unique and innovative utilization of new media forms have created ways for audiences to engage with environmental activism by creating an entirely new environment in a virtual world.

Ultimately, Indigenous contemporary art in Canada has successfully found a rightful place in museum and gallery spaces but still has much progress to make in its effort to bring environmental activism to new audiences. The struggles of exhibitions such as *The Spirit Sings* provide valuable insight into the importance of understanding and a need for radical shifts in how curators/administrators communicate with artists and perceive the artwork they curate. There are also successful exhibitions that provide a glimpse into how Indigenous artwork should be presented going forward, including *Art for a New Understanding*, which conveys that placing Indigenous art within the broader history of contemporary art is key to making progress through curation.

Images



Fig. 1

Marianne Nicolson, *La'am 'lawisuxw Yaxuxsan's 'Nalax - Then the Deluge of Our World Came*, 2017

Acrylic, mother of pearl, and brass on wood, 152.4 x 487.7 cm

Photo: Slikati Photo + Video

Photo obtained from The Tye, <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2019/01/24/Art-Indigenous-Rights-Activism-Environment/>

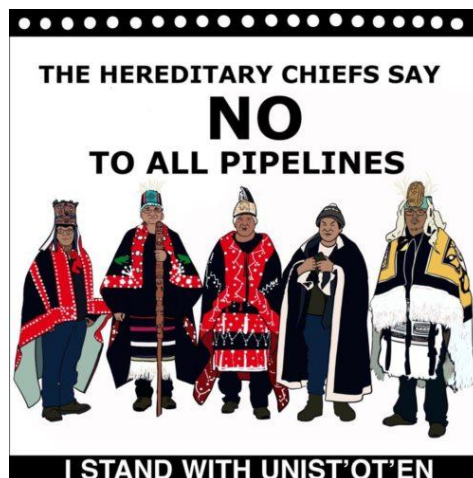


Fig. 2

Christi Belcourt, *Untitled*, n.d.

Digital Image, 298 x 298 px

Image obtained from Wet'suwet'en Supporter Toolkit, <http://unistoten.camp/supportertoolkit/>



Fig. 3

Daphne Odjig, *The Indian in Transition*, 1978

Acrylic on canvas, 2.74 x 8.23 m

Collection of the Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau, Quebec



Fig. 4

Bill Reid, *Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Black Canoe*, 1991

Plaster and metal, 389 x 605 x 348 cm

Collection of the Canadian Embassy, Washington D.C.

© Bill Reid Estate



Fig. 5

Christi Belcourt, *Frog (Unist'ot'en No Pipelines)*, n.d.

Digital Image, 547 x 657 px

Image obtained from Onaman Collective website, <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>



Fig. 6

Christi Belcourt, Isaac Murdoch, Et al. *Untitled*, 2017

Photo: Rose Stiffarm

Image obtained from canadianart, <https://canadianart.ca/news/tiny-art-houses-stand-up-to-pipelines/>



Fig.7

Marianne Nicolson, *Cliff Painting*, 1998

Petroglyph, Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia

Image obtained from The Medicine Project,

https://themedicineproject.com/mariannepic.php?img=images/marianne/cliff_painting_03.jpg



Fig. 8

Marianne Nicolson, Et al. *Community Pictograph*, 2019

Petroglyph, Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations territory, British Columbia

Image obtained from The Tyee, <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2019/08/19/Power-Protest-Pictographs/>

© Marianne Nicolson



Fig. 9

Marianne Nicolson, *Walking on Water (Thin Ice)*, 2013

Laser-cut glass and wood

Image obtained from Georgia Straight, <https://www.straight.com/arts/376971/marianne-nicolsons-walking-water-thin-ice-asks-us-consider-consequences-climate-change>



Fig. 10

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Killer Whale Has a Vision and Comes to Talk to me about Proximological Encroachments of Civilizations in the Oceans*, 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 280 x 184 cm

Private collection

Image obtained from National Gallery of Canada, <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/unceded-territories-lawrence-paul-yuxweluptun-at-the-museum-of-anthropology>



Fig. 11

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky*, 1990

Acrylic on canvas, 142 x 226.1 cm

Private collection

Image obtained from artist website, <https://lawrencepaulyuxweluptun.com/retrospective.html#null>



Fig. 12

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Paisley Smith, *Unceded Territories*, 2019

Still Image from *Unceded Territories* VR Trailer

Image obtained from artist YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNxnSaVO3VU>



Fig. 13

Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding*, 1998

Nike Air Jordan shoes, human hair, 48.9 x 21 x 25.5 cm

Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery



Fig. 14

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Scorched Earth, Clear Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix*, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, 196.6 x 276 cm
National Art Gallery of Canada

Works Cited

“Art for a New Understanding - Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.” n.d. Accessed April 22, 2021.

<https://crystalbridges.org/exhibitions/art-for-new-understanding/>.

“Artist Statement.” n.d. Marianne Nicolson, MFA, MA, PhD. Accessed April 22, 2021.

<https://www.mariannenicolson.com/>.

Awasis, Sakihitowin. 2017. “Keep It in the Ground! - Canadian Art.” Canadianart. August 7, 2017.

<https://canadianart.ca/features/keep-it-in-the-ground/>.

Besaw, Mindy N., Candice Hopkins, and Manuela Well-Off-Man. "Art for a New Understanding." In *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, 4-15. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2018. Accessed April 27, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv75db7c.5>.

“Bill Reid Gallery | About Bill Reid.” n.d. Bill Reid Gallery. Accessed April 20, 2021.

<https://www.billreidgallery.ca/pages/about-bill-reid>.

“Civilization.ca - Grand Hall - Spirit of Haida Gwaii.” n.d. Accessed April 21, 2021.

<https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/grand/gh04eng.html>.

Devine, Heather. “After The Spirit Sang.” Essay. In *How Canadians Communicate: Contexts of Canadian Popular Culture*, edited by Bart Beaty, Derek Briton, Gloria Filax, and Rebecca Sullivan, 217. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2010.

Gray, Viviane. “Indian Artists' Statements Through Time.” Essay. In *the Shadow of the Sun: Perspectives on Contemporary Native Art*, 148. Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1993.

Guo, Demi. 2020. “Indigenous Artists Use Technology to Tell Stories About Their Ancestral Lands.” YES! Magazine (blog). June 15, 2020.

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2020/06/15/indigenous-artists-climate-technology>.

Laurence, Robin. 2013. “Marianne Nicolson’s Walking on Water (Thin Ice) Asks Us to Consider the Consequences of Climate Change.” *The Georgia Straight*. April 30, 2013.

<https://www.straight.com/arts/376971/marianne-nicolsons-walking-water-thin-ice-asks-us-consider-consequences-climate-change>.

- Martin, Lee-Ann. "Anger and Reconciliation: A Very Brief History of Exhibiting Contemporary Indigenous Art in Canada." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (2017): 109. <https://doi.org/10.1086/692560>.
- Odjig, Daphne, Bob Boyer, and Carol Podedworny. *Odjig: The Art of Daphne Odjig, 1966-2000*, 54. Toronto, Ont.: Key Porter Books, 2001.
- Rubinstein, Dan. 2019. "Indigenous Art and Activism." Carleton Newsroom. January 24, 2019. <https://newsroom.carleton.ca/story/indigenous-art-activism/>.
- Sánchez, Joseph. n.d. "PNIAI / Native Group of Seven." Joseph M Sánchez. Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://www.josephmsanchez.com/pniai-native-group-of-seven>.
- Sánchez, Joseph. "The Formation of Professional Native Artists, Inc." Essay. In *Witness: Selected Proceedings of Witness, A Symposium on the Woodland School of Painters*, edited by Bonnie Devine, 31. Toronto, ON: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and Witness, 2009.
- Sandals, Leah. 2017. "Tiny Art Houses Stand Up to Pipeline." *Canadianart*. November 30, 2017. <https://canadianart.ca/news/tiny-art-houses-stand-up-to-pipelines/>.
- Smith, Matthew. 2016. "Dzawada'enuxw Interdisciplinary Artist and Educator Marianne Nicolson, PhD." *First American Art Magazine*, 2016.
- "The Spirit of Haida Gwaii." n.d. Bill Reid Foundation. Accessed April 21, 2021. <http://www.billreidfoundation.ca/banknote/spirit.htm>.
- "TINY HOUSE WARRIORS – Our Land Is Home." n.d. Tiny House Warriors. Accessed April 21, 2021. http://www.tinyhousewarriors.com/#whats_happening.
- Varley, Christopher, and Russell Bingham. "Group of Seven". In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historical Canada. Article published July 11, 2013; Last Edited November 14, 2019. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/group-of-seven>
- "What We Do | Onaman Collective." n.d. Onaman Collective. Accessed April 21, 2021. <http://onamancollective.com/what-we-do/>.
- Woodend, Dorothy. 2019. "Power, Protest and Pictographs." *The Tyee*. The Tyee. August 19, 2019. <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2019/08/19/Power-Protest-Pictographs/>.